# A Note on the Treatment of Music in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

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和文要旨

この論文では、ハニフ・クレイシの作品、特に*The Black Album*における音楽の扱われ方について述べる。クレイシは現代文化におけるポピュラー音楽の重要性や影響力の大きさを深く意識し、そのことについてしばしば書いてもいる。彼の作品の中でも、ポップ・ミュージックは大切な位置を占めているのだが、彼の映画・劇作品に比べて小説では、その扱われ方があまり効果的でない。そこで本論では、この差はどうして生じるのか、ということを考えた上で、*The Black Album*の中では、音楽の描写が主題の一端を担う意味を負わされている事、音楽の直接的な描写がむずかしい小説というジャンルでは、音楽の周辺にあるドラッグ（麻薬）やダンス文化を描く事で、作品中に音楽の存在を組み入れようとしている事を明らかにしようと試みている。

> As the high-brow novelists moved away from ordinary people, leaving them to 'trash'... and thus opening the gap between 'high' and 'low' culture, outsiders of all sorts and young people in particular were finding other, quicker methods of communication.
> This was pop.*[1]

Hanif Kureishi has written plays, screenplays, novels, short stories, and essays, as well as edited a non-fiction anthology, and directed one of his film scripts. The range of his chosen genres suggests Kureishi's interest in

"an attempt to tell a story by other means."*[2] Indeed in his works, similar characters and stories appear across genres, having been given different emphasis each time. Reading (and watching) Kureishi's works collectively, one begins to feel a sense of familiarity as if one is moving within the same neighbourhood, coming across recognizable characters from various angles time and again. In this neighbourhood, both major and minor characters from different texts seem to share similar lives and predicaments. There are, for instance, young men searching for their identities (Karim Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Shahid Hasan in *The Black Album*), Men contemplating separation after several years of steady relationship or marriage (Jay in *Intimacy* and Rocco in *Lately*), sons of Indian restaurant owners half being forced to study accountancy (Hat in *The Black Album*, and Haron in *Borderline*), sexually active daughters of the first generation immigrants having to submit to arranged marriages (Jamila in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Amina in *Boderline*), Asian British youths embracing Islam which their parents almost abandaned (*The Black Album, Borderline, My Son the Fanatic*), Indian men conducting Meditation classes (Haroon Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Dr Bubba in *London Kills Me*, both of which, incidentally, are played by Roshan Seth in films), and taxi drivers watching porn videos at the back of their offices (in *The Black Album* and My Son, the Fanatic).*[3]

Not only are the characters often similar, but there are also recurrent themes. One of the most prominent is the issue of identity and belonging. Kureishi's contemporary multicultural Britain contains racial prejudice, discrimination, and violence, which often make his second-generation Black and Asian British characters "victim(s) in ... (their) own country."*[4] Thus these characters are constantly having to adjust themselves vis-à-vis their surroundings, which are their only homes, but also a hostile space that excludes them, and a dangerous battleground where they need to keep on

claiming the legitimacy of their existence. They need to question who they are, and examine who they are supposed to be, or told to be.

The works of Kuerishi are, however, not simple "race" texts. His characters are not always solely preoccupied with racial injustices. They go about their businesses, they meet friends, they make love, and they go through various rites of passage, often taking their surroundings in their strides. One of the important components of the world these characters live in, which intermingles with their surroundings, is music. Or more precisely, pop music. Although music hardly poses as an issue in the same way as race or identity--thus it is difficult to regard it as a theme as such --it is always present between the sentences and dialogues of Kureishi's works, making it an important element in his creative space.

In his essays, Kureishi has written about the effect of music on himself at a formative age, as well as on its position in contemporary society. If the ubiquitous presence of music seems to be taken for granted by his characters, the writer has cultivated its effects consciously and deliberately as a part of his creative technique.

In this paper, I would like to consider Kureishi's use of music in several of his works, and examine its effects in different genres, with a particular emphasis on *The Black Album*. This is because the treatment of music seems more problematic in novels, and also because this novel possesses both Kureishi's earlier and later concerns: A process of growing up in multicultural Britain, which includes the involvement with drugs and music, as well as religion. There is unevenness in Kureishi's treatment of drugs, music, and religion in different genres. Despite his preoccupation with the medium, Kureishi's use of music in *The Black Album* is not as successful as in a play such as *King and I* or a film such as *London Kills Me*. I would like to examine why this is so, and also to consider a possible reading of his treatment of music at a thematical level. I would like to conclude that the

problematic use of music in *The Black Album* is compensated by the other descriptions of London's youth culture, which seems to indicate, in an indirect way, the trace of sensual and evasive quality of music.

Hanif Kureishi is not the only writer interested in the effect of pop music on himself or on contemporary society in general. Other writers of his generation, Kazuo Ishiguro, for instance, also acknowledge how important it has been in their lives particularly during adolescent years. However, one discerns Kureishi's particular attachment to this topic from the fact that he has edited, with Jon Savage, a 800+ page anthology of writings on pop music that covers the period between 1942 and 1994. According to Kureishi, "pop ... has been at the centre of post-war culture,"*5 and many of his works reflect this notion.

In the essay entitled 'Eight Arms to Hold You,' Kureishi records what pop music and its practitioners represented for the boys of the Beatles years:

> We had no life guides or role models among politicians, military types or religious figures, or even film stars for that matter, as our parents did. Footballers and pop stars were the revered figures of my generation and the Beatles, more than anyone, were exemplary for countless young people. .... The Beatles came to represent opportunity and possibility. They were careers officers, a myth for us to live by, a light for us to follow. ... pop music is the one area in which ... belief in mobility, reward and opportunity does exist.*6

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi has depicted this sense of mobility and freedom, which influenced the post-Beatle generation of 1970 s. Everyone was heading for "somewhere"*7. In this post-60 s, pre-AIDS era, sex and drugs could still be enjoyed with carefree optimism.

By the end of the 1980 s, which is the setting for both *The Black Album* and *London Kills Me*, such mobility and freedom seemed to have turned inward. Now it only exists in the "stoned" state induced by heavier intake

of drugs, or in the religious fervour, which prides in a complete denial of the youthful pleasures found in the western world, and a willing submission to the strict orders of the religion.

In *The Black Book*, its main character, Shahid, is drawn to two conflicting worlds which co-exist in the late 20th century London. On the one hand, is the world represented by Deedee Osgood, which includes intimate physical and emotional involvement, intellectual examination of culture, as well as drug-taking and rave-going. On the other is the world of fellow student Muslim brothers and sisters, with its strong sense of solidarity, belonging, and identity. Music is associated with the former in this novel.

In *The Black Album*, music takes the form of dance-tunes played in various rave venues, those Shahid and Deedee listen to at leisure, and the ones Deedee Osgood plays in her lectures, as well as a small number of music heard about town. For a recently converted religious fundamentalist like Chad, the effect of music is compared to that of the drugs, as something addictive which overtakes one's soul (65). This association of music with drug is enforced by the fact that music-lovers in the novel are also the drug-takers. When Deedee offers drugs to Shahid, there is always music playing in the background. Deedee, especially in the first half of the book, represents the unholy trinity of London life---Sex, drug, and music. Of the three, one sees that it is the pleasure of music that Chad seems to find hardest to tear himself away.

> They were plodding through one gully when Shahid recognized the weeping brass of 'Try a Little tenderness' coming from an open window. Chad heard it too, and stopped dead....Chad bent down and tied his shoelaces, twice, for as long as the music played. Getting up, he saw Shahid regarding him. Chad's eyes were wet. Shahid wanted to put his arms around him, but he marched on. (74)

Harmless ubiquity of music makes it even more dangerous than drug or sex for those who try to avoid its physical and mood-changing effect. For

those who see no reason to avoid it, its influence is almost automatic:

> Suddenly Shahid was hearing something that made his knees bob. Was it the Doors? No, crazy, it was something new, the Stone Roses or Inspiral Carpets, one of those Manchester guitar groups. Whoever it was lifted him. Music could act like an adrenalin injection on him, and he wanted to go woo -woo-whoa .... When he stopped trying to hold himself together, he realized he was liking this. He was certain now that he wanted to be here. Yes, this wasn't too bad.(48-49)

Apart from a few scenes where music catches the protagonists unawares, most of the acts of listening to music in *The Black Album* are described as a deliberate deed. Deedee played "She's Leaving Home" as she prepared herself to leave home(94), she married her husband because they both loved The Beatles(95). She puts Madonna's "Vogue" when she puts make-up on Shahid(98), and she turns the music off to indicate the end of fun(92). Shahid chooses to play one song or another to "savour" a particular moment(64). The music is seldom accidental in this text: whenever the music is mentioned, one is also informed of the act of someone putting it on, whether it is Shahid, Deedee, or an anonymous character such as the one who "danced across the pub, after putting 'Kiss' on the jukebox." (138)

This is in contrast with the way music is treated in *London Kills Me*, for instance, where it often floats in and out of scenes without the spectators catching the moment of some characters actually putting it on. As a director, Kureishi gave a brief to Charlie Gillett, the film's Music Consultant, to "give the film an authentic atmosphere"[*8]. The emphasis was on "a patchwork quilt of London's sounds which an audience would 'believe' without knowing the individual items."[*9]

In *The Black Album*, such ignorance of individual items is not tolerated, as music is always presented by the titles of particular songs, often with the artists' names. Kureishi has accompanied some of these titles with a few

words from lyrics, such as 'Sexual Healing' ("Get up, wake up, let's make love tonight," 105) or 'Vogue' ("What are you looking at?" 98), but such a practise is rare. Thus, the reader needs to know all the names of the songs that appear in *The Black Album* to appreciate its effect and presence in the text. Unlike the film soundtrack, which is constructed carefully, but which the spectators can dip into almost at an unconscious level as a part of background, music in *The Black Album* is foregrounded as a piece of information. This is inevitable, as music in novels needs to be introduced in words, and there needs to be some justification to do so.

Kureishi is conscious of the fact that the kind of music he is dealing with cannot be delineated by letters:

> Pop is a form crying out not to be written about. It is physical, sensual, of the body rather than the mind, and in some ways it is anti-intellectual; let yourself go, don't think-feel.*[10]

Among Kureishi's attempts in describing the evasive quality of music, his early play, The *King and I* is, in my view, one of the most successful. In this play, Kureishi brings about the narcotic quality of music through the description of Elvis-mad housewife, her daydreaming, her dreamlike words, the intensity of her desire to listen to the music, and her insistence on her husband's winning the Elvis Presley contest, which he tries to oblige.

In *The Black Album*, however, Kureishi does not offer much description of the effect of music, *per se*, but leaves the reader with the names and titles. These song titles, as well as names for particular items of clothing or brands which Kureishi is also very specific about, may be instantly recognizable for contemporary readers who share the same culture. Kureishi may be right in counting on readers' familiarity with them. As he has acknowledged,

> If I (Kureishi) read a novel, there was no one to discuss it with, whereas if a hot album came out one felt excluded if one hadn't heard it.*[11]

This treatment of music. however, is not very successful as far as its musical effect is concerned. How many of the readers can actually remember the exact tunes by reading the names of artists or the titles of songs? For a reader such as myself, this kind of information from about a decade ago ceased to be stored in my memory, even though I can still recognise lyrics or tunes when I hear them, and they do evoke emotions and memories from a particular period. If one can say with Kureishi that much of pops thrive in the immediacy of "the moment", exhibiting the names has the effect contrary to its nature. It alienates the reader who is or has become outside the particular immediacy of the depicted culture. For such a reader, these names or titles hardly evoke the sound, the sight, or the atmosphere of the period or the place, but has the effect of museum labels only useful for those who wish to research on the topic. In fact, when Kureishi writes about certain period---whether it is about 1970s, 80s, or 90s ---there is always a sense of history, a certain detachment and objective examination of the time and space in which he sets his work. Especially in his novels, the music introduced are, what one can call, classics of the period, which may suit more anthropological approach.

In *The Black Album* this treatment of music as a museum label, a piece of anthropological information, is represented at a thematic level. For Deedee Osgood, a lecturer of Cultural Studies, music is not just a part of life, but also an object of enquiry. In her lectures, the act of playing music becomes even more deliberate, as the music is cut off from its usual dwelling space, and examined semiotically. Even in private, she discusses "pop music and drugs, in the way adult discuss(es) wine or literature." (47) Here music is brought into the area of intellectual, linguistic discussion, quite alien to its quality. The attraction of Prince, for instance, is analysed by Deedee thus:

He's half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size,

> feminine but macho too. His work contains and extends the history of black American music, Little Richard, James Brown, Sly Stone, Hendrix ...(21)

One can say that Deedee belongs to Type 1 listener ("the expert") in Theodor Adorno's classification of music listeners. Shahid, who wishes to be a writer, is impressed no end, as all he could muster then was "Well, the sound."(21) Coaxed by Deedee, Shahid tries "to order his words into sense."(21) Not only is Deedee Shahid's teacher on campus, she is an "educator"(64) even off campus, in London.

Although she seems to plunge into the music, dance, and drugs wholeheartedly, there is always a part of her that treats these venues and experiences as a researcher. She needs to check out, catch up. She is conscious about the fact that she is usually the oldest person at a rave scene (54), and she uses her students as the informant of such culture(50):

> The music her students liked, how they danced, their clothes and language, it was theirs, a living way. She tried to enter it, extent it, ask questions. (111)

Shahid also contributes to her by providing her with the sample of music he listens to at home(126). Shahid is useful for Deedee, as he is grateful of her instruction, accompanies her in her research on the contemporary youth culture by going to raves, taking drugs, and experimenting with sex, and he is not threatening for her. There may be some truth in the statement of Tahira, one of the Muslim sisters, when she says, "(o)ur people have always been sexual objects for the whites."(190)

However, the novel is written from the point of view of Shahid's growing process, thus the benefit he receives is greater. Through the relationship with Deedee, he is learning to become more of a writer:

> He...began to write with concentrated excitement. He had to find some sense in his recent experiences; he wanted to know and understand. How could anyone confine them selves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self:surely our several selves melted and

> mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity.(228)

As Shahid is separated from the religious fundamentalist students---"the alliance terminated the moment Hat soaked the book in petrol"(190) for the book-burning---Deedee gives him the best of the two worlds---the world of senses and the world of writing. For him Deedee herself is music, which he wishes to listen to(126), or to play(108), and their relationship remains in the temporary space which only exists "until it stops being fun"(230). By becoming able to "write" about his experiences, Shahid's relatiohship with Deedee and the world she represents has become his own.

There are different ways in which the music in a novel can be read. One can see it as an integral part of the construction of a setting, giving it an authenticity and evoking the right "period" atmosphere*[11]. One can also see it as a useful assistance of a theme, which it does by juxtaposing the theme of the text with coinciding theme from certain music*[12]. In *The Black Album,* one can say that the presentation of music, rather than its content, contributes to the theme. The lack of musical effect resulting from the rather bare use of titles and names is compensated by Kureishi's depiction of sex and drugs.

> Writing about pop introduces us to the fringes of the respectable world, to marijuana, generational conflict, clubs, parties, and to a certain kind of guiltless, casual sex that had never been written about before.*[13]

In *The Black Album*, writing about these "fringes of the respectable world" is the way music can make its presence felt in black and white world of the printed letters.

# NOTES

* 1 Hanif Kureishi, "That's how good it was" *The Faber Book of Pop* ed.Hanif Kureishi and Jon Savage (London: Faber and Faber,1995) xviii.
* 2 Hanif Kureishi, Introduction to *London Kills Me* (London:Faber and Faber, 1991) xi.
* 3 Kureishi is himself aware of this overwrap, which he calls a process of "setting-out of the themes." He has said that he is interested in the continuity of his characters in different plays. Hanif Kureishi, Introduction to *Outskirts and Other Plays* (London:Faber and Faber, 1992) xix,xx.
* 4 Hanif Kureishi, "Introduction: The Road Exactly" *My Son, the Fanatic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) xi.
* 5 *The Faber Book of Pop* xix.
* 6 Hanif Kureishi, "Eight Arms to Hold You" *London Kills Me* 84, 93.
* 7 Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London:Faber and Faber, 1990) 3.
* 8 Charlie Gillet, "Source Music in *London Kills Me*" *London Kills Me*, 77.
* 9 Gillet, 77.
* 10 "That's how good it was", xix
* 11 Hanif Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays*, xii.
* 12 See, for instance, Naoyuki Ishizaka, "A jazz novel in prewar Japan: The soundscape in Kawabata's *Asakusa Kurenai-dan*" in *Popular Music: Intercultural Interpretations* ed. T. Mitsui (Kanazawa: Kanazawa University, 1998) 56-59.
* 13 C.f. Russell Reising, " 'Echoes' of the West: Kobo Abe, Haruki Murakami, and the rock and roll imagination" *Popular Music*, 60-66.
* 14 "That's how good it was", xix.

* 10 "That's how good it was", xix
* 11 Hanif Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays*, xii.
* 12 See, for instance, Naoyuki Ishiz